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Real life

Protecting kids from the sun's harmful rays

Rhonda's PROJECT

Rhonda Sparks, 39, Sonora, Calif.

My 32-year-old husband, Darren, succumbed to melanoma three days after the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001. I remember vividly the day he came home from the doctor's office five years earlier and said, "Honey, I have skin cancer." He had a simple mole that had changed in shape. I blew it off, saying, "It's just skin cancer. They'll just remove that mole and you'll be fine." Well, he wasn't fine. He went through three different surgeries and two years of treatments but eventually lost the battle.

My little boys were just 1, 3 and 6 at the time, and I was left to raise them on my own. I was a total wreck. It felt like someone had come and literally ripped my heart right out of my chest and left me for dead. The boys were so little, they didn't quite understand what had happened to their daddy, so of course they wanted to play and laugh, while I just wanted to hide under my covers for days on end. But despite my overwhelming yearning for Darren, I couldn't wallow in grief. I owned my own business, providing conference-calling services, and I had to continue working to keep it afloat and support my sons. My family and friends stepped in to help

me out, but that first year was incredibly tough.

The guilt I carried for telling Darren, "Oh, it's just skin cancer," was extreme. I wanted so badly to do something positive in his name. Just a few months after Darren died, my brother helped me launch the DLF Foundation to raise awareness about the dangers of sun exposure and how to protect against them. We started setting up booths at fairs and visiting schools, and knowing I was doing something meaningful began to bring me out of the shadows. I continued to focus more on the nonprofit, and

though I was still making enough to support my family, my own business began to suffer.

Around that time, I remembered an idea that Darren and I had discussed during his cancer treatment. We were tired of slathering sunscreen on our kids every couple of hours, questioning the chemicals and whether we had missed any spots. Back then, rash guards weren't really on the market, so we thought, why not make T-shirts with UV protection that kids could swim in? We even came up with a name: UV Skinz. In my grief, I'd forgotten it, but so many parents I

spoke to felt the way I did about sunscreen that I knew I had to do it—for Darren and for our kids.

During the next couple of years I researched what it would take to get shirts made and designed, and in



Rhonda and her three boys (from left: Ethan, Seth and Caleb)

Rhonda's tips

- ▶ **BE PATIENT.** You have to go that extra mile when others give up. It takes time to make anything come to fruition in a meaningful way. There were many times in the past five years I considered giving up because I didn't think my actions were making a big enough difference. But in the end, it was worth it.
- ▶ **RAISE MONEY.** Once I made the commitment to follow through with my plan—and saw that it could be a viable business—I put all of my savings into it. I'm a risk-taker that way. But if you have other options, like outside investors, take advantage of them. Everything, including a charity, needs capital to get off the ground.
- ▶ **GIVE FREELY.** I have probably donated as much product as I've sold, but it's worth it because of the good I'm doing and the goodwill I receive in turn.

VISIT DLFFFOUNDATION.COM AND UVSKINZ.COM.

2005 I made my first batch of UV Skinz to hand out at local events. Everyone wanted them, including adults, and I started to wonder if I could actually support my family by starting a business selling these protective clothes. The demand for them has kept growing, and now I sell UV Skinz swim clothes for the entire family on my own website and also at retailers as diverse as Costco and Nordstrom.

The purpose behind the foundation and UV Skinz has been my saving grace and my way to begin to heal from such a devastating loss. Darren never realized just how dangerous sun exposure is. It's my mission to make it different for his boys and all other children around the world. I don't want anyone to have to tell their loved one, "It's just skin cancer," ever again.

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Ethan modeling a UV Skinz shirt